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ABSTRACT

A growing body of evidence suggests that when students are intrinsically motivated they tend to employ strategies that demand more effort and that enable them to process information more deeply. Teachers can help motivate students to learn by maintaining a caring, supportive classroom climate. Tasks should be challenging but achievable and defined in terms of specific, short-term goals. School-level policies and practices should stress learning, task mastery, and effort rather than relative performance and competition. To help unmotivated students a process called "attribution retraining" involves modeling, socialization, and practice exercises. Other potentially useful strategies include the following: portray effort as investment rather than risk, portray skill development as incremental and domain-specific, and focus on mastery. (Contains nine references.) (MLF)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Student Motivation to Learn

by Linda S. Lumsden

Infants and young children appear to be propelled by curiosity, driven by an intense need to explore, interact with, and make sense of their environment. As one author puts it, "Rarely does one hear parents complain that their preschooler is 'unmotivated' " (James Raffini 1993).

Unfortunately, as children grow, their passion for learning frequently seems to shrink. Learning often becomes associated with drudgery instead of delight. A large number of students— more than one in four— leave school before graduating. Many more are physically present in the classroom but largely mentally absent; they fail to invest themselves fully in the experience of learning.

Awareness of how students' attitudes and beliefs about learning develop and what facilitates learning for its own sake can assist educators in reducing student apathy.

What Is Student Motivation?

Student motivation naturally has to do with students' desire to participate in the learning process. But it also concerns the reasons or goals that underlie their involvement or noninvolvement in academic activities. Although students may be equally motivated to perform a task, the sources of their motivation may differ.

A student who is *intrinsically* motivated undertakes an activity "for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes" (Mark Lepper 1988). An *extrinsically* motivated student performs *"in order to* obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself," such as grades, stickers, or teacher approval (Lepper).

The term *motivation to learn* has a slightly different meaning. It is defined by one author as "the meaningfulness, value, and benefits of academic tasks to the learner—regard-less of whether or not they are intrinsically interesting" (Hermine Marshall 1987). Another notes that motivation to learn is characterized by long-term, quality involvement in learning and commitment to the process of learning (Carole Ames 1990).

What Factors Influence the Development of Students' Motivation?

According to Jere Brophy (1987), motivation to learn is a competence acquired "through general experience but stimulated most directly through modeling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction or socialization by significant others (especially parents and teachers)."

Children's home environment shapes the initial constellation of attitudes they develop toward learning. When parents nurture their children's natural curiosity about the world by welcoming their questions, encouraging exploration, and familiarizing them with resources that can enlarge their world, they are giving their children the message that learning is worthwhile and frequently fun and satisfying.

When children are raised in a home that nurtures a sense of self-worth, competence, autonomy, and self-efficacy, they will be more apt to accept the risks inherent in learning. Conversely, when children do not view themselves as basically competent and able, their freedom to engage in academically challenging pursuits and capacity to tolerate and cope with failure are greatly diminished.

Once children start school, they begin forming beliefs about their school-related successes and failures. The sources to which children attribute their successes (commonly effort, ability, luck, or level of task difficulty) and failures (often lack of ability or lack of effort) have important implications for how they approach and cope with learning situations.

The beliefs teachers themselves have about teaching and learning and the nature of the expectations they hold for students also exert a powerful influence (Raffini). As Deborah Stipek (1988) notes, "To a very large degree, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn."

Schoolwide goals, policies, and procedures also interact with classroom climate and practices to affirm or alter students' increasingly complex learning-related attitudes and beliefs.

And developmental changes comprise one more strand of the motivational web. For example, although young children tend to maintain high expectations for success even in the face of repeated failure, older students do not. And although younger children tend to see effort as uniformly positive, older children view it as a "double-edged sword" (Ames). To them, failure following high effort appears to carry more negative implications—

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especially for their self-concept of ability—than failure that results from minimal or no effort.

Are There Advantages to Intrinsic Motivation?

Does it really matter whether students are primarily intrinsically or extrinsically oriented toward learning? A growing body of evidence suggests that it does.

When intrinsically motivated, students tend to employ strategies that demand more effort and that enable them to process information more deeply (Lepper).

J. Condry and J. Chambers (1978) found that when students were confronted with complex intellectual tasks, those with an intrinsic orientation used more logical information-gathering and decision-making strategies than did students who were extrinsically oriented.

Students with an intrinsic orientation also tend to prefer tasks that are moderately challenging, whereas extrinsically oriented students gravitate toward tasks that are low in degree of difficulty. Extrinsically oriented students are inclined to put forth the minimal amount of effort necessary to get the maximal reward (Lepper).

Although every educational activity cannot, and perhaps should not, be intrinsically motivating, these findings suggest that when teachers can capitalize on existing intrinsic motivation, there are several potential benefits.

How Can Motivation To Learn Be Fostered in the School Setting?

Although students' motivational histories accompany them into each new classroom setting, it is essential for teachers to view themselves as "*active socialization agents* capable of stimulating . . . student motivation to learn" (Brophy 1987).

Classroom climate is important. If students experience the classroom as a caring, supportive place where there is a sense of belonging and everyone is valued and respected, they will tend to participate more fully in the process of learning.

Various task dimensions can also foster motivation to learn. Ideally, tasks should be challenging but achievable. Relevance also promotes motivation, as does "contextualizing" learning, that is, helping students to see how skills can be applied in the real world (Lepper). Tasks that involve "a moderate amount of discrepancy or incongruity" are beneficial because they stimulate students' curiosity, an intrinsic motivator (Lepper).

In addition, defining tasks in terms of specific, short-term goals can assist students to associate effort with success (Stipek). Verbally noting the purposes of specific tasks when introducing them to students is also beneficial (Brophy 1986).

Extrinsic rewards, on the other hand, should be used with caution, for they have the potential for decreasing existing intrinsic motivation.

What takes place in the classroom is critical, but "the classroom is not an island" (Martin Maehr and Carol Midgley 1991). Depending on their degree of congruence with classroom goals and practices, schoolwide goals either dilute or enhance classroom efforts. To support motivation to learn, school-level policies and practices should stress "learning, task mastery, and effort" (Maehr and Midgley) rather than relative performance and competition.

What Can Be Done To Help Unmotivated Students?

A first step is for educators to recognize that even when students use strategies that are ultimately self-defeating (such as withholding effort, cheating, procrastination, and so forth), their goal is actually to protect their sense of self-worth (Raffini).

A process called *attribution retraining*, which involves modeling, socialization, and practice exercises, is sometimes used with discouraged students. The goals of attribution retraining are to help students to (1) concentrate on the tasks rather than becoming distracted by fear of failure; (2) respond to frustration by retracing their steps to find mistakes or figuring out alternative ways of approaching a problem instead of giving up; and (3) attribute their failures to insufficient effort, lack of information, or reliance on ineffective strategies rather than to lack of ability (Brophy 1986).

Other potentially useful strategies include the following: portray effort as investment rather than risk, portray skill development as incremental and domain-specific, focus on mastery (Brophy 1986).

Because the potential payoff—having students who value learning for its own sake—is priceless, it is crucial for parents, teachers, and school leaders to devote themselves fully to engendering, maintaining, and rekindling students' motivation to learn.

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